

Pete vs. the Python



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"Python Pete" is being trained to track pythons, such as this one.

Some dogs track criminals. Other dogs sniff out **quail**¹. In Florida, National Park Service officials are training a beagle puppy, nicknamed "Python Pete," to locate 15-foot pythons.

For years, Burmese pythons, which are not native to Florida, have been threatening to overrun Everglades National Park. **Exotic pet**² owners introduced the reptiles to the region by dumping them in the forests of southern Florida.

The beasts have been multiplying quickly, eating native **mangrove**³, **fox squirrels**⁴, wood storks, and other wildlife. National Park Service officials removed 52 Burmese pythons from the park from the mid-1990s through 2003. In 2004, they captured 61 pythons.

That's where "Python Pete" comes in. The dog's owner, Lori Oberhofer, who works for the National Park Service, has been training Pete to track pythons and to bark when he spots one. Park officials would then spring into action, capturing and removing the reptile. Oberhofer got the idea after reading about Jack Russell terriers that detect brown tree snakes in cargo at an airport in Guam, an island in the South Pacific. "I figured that if a terrier could be trained to sniff out brown tree snakes, then perhaps a beagle could be trained to sniff out pythons," Oberhofer told *National Geographic News*.

Twice a week, Oberhofer puts a live python in a bag and drags it through a field. She then drops the bag and Pete's favorite rope toy. Oberhofer hooks Pete up to a special harness so he knows that it's time to find a snake. "He continues to show improvement each time I take him out to train," she said. "It hasn't taken him long to figure out that smelling a python means playtime for him."

¹ **quail**: a kind of bird related to the chicken

² **exotic pet**: pets that are unusual and often from another country

³ **mangrove**: tropical trees or shrubs that grow in somewhat salty marshes or shallow salt water

⁴ **fox squirrel**: largest species of tree squirrels native to North America.